

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
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R 141406Z SEP 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9670
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 05396

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, SY
SUBJECT: FRENCH AMBASSADOR CHARACTERIZES INTERNAL SYRIAN
SITUATION AS WORRISOME BUT WE DISAGREE

1. DURING CALL ON FRENCH AMBASSADOR SEPTEMBER 11, HE
EXPRESSED VIEW THAT INTERNAL SITUATION IN SYRIA IS
WORRISOME. HE FELT THAT THE REGIME IS WEAKENING ITS
HOLD AND THAT THERE IS INCREASING POPULAR DISCONTENT.
HE CITED THREE PRINCIPAL REASONS FOR THIS: (A) A BAD
YEAR FOR THE ECONOMY AND NO IMMEDIATE PROSPECT FOR
IMPROVEMENT; (B) RAMPANT CORRUPTION AMONG BOTH OFFICIALS
AND NON-OFFICIALS; AND (C) GROWING DISENCHANTMENT WITH
SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON.

2. COMMENT: THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR IS A THREE-YEAR
VETERAN OF THE SYRIAN SCENE AND AN ASTUTE OBSERVER
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WITH LINES OF CONTACT INTO BAATH PARTY AND MILITARY
WHICH ARE NOT OPEN TO US. NEVERTHELESS, WE DO NOT
SHARE THE DEPTH OF HIS CONCERN ABOUT THE WEAKENING OF
THE REGIME. THE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AND CORRUPTION ARE
NOTHING NEW ON THE SYRIAN LANDSCAPE AND DO NOT APPEAR
TO HAVE REACHED A CRITICAL POINT. IT IS TRUE THAT
MANY SYRIANS ARE QUESTIONING THE WISDOM OF CONTINUED

INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON, PARTICULARLY AS CASUALTIES MOUNT AND INTERNATIONAL CRITICISM OF SYRIA'S ROLE IS HEARD. THUS FAR, HOWEVER, THERE DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE A CONSENSUS AGAINST PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD'S POLICY.

3. TWO FACTORS MAY BE AT THE ROOT OF THE DISCONTENT WHICH THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR PERCEIVES: FIRST, THE BELIEF BY MANY SYRIANS THAT PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD IS TERMINALLY ILL. THIS HAS LED TO CONSIDERABLE SPECULATION ABOUT THE FUTURE -- MOST OF IT PESSIMISTIC. SECOND, THE BAATH PARTY REGIONAL CONGRESS, TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED FOR NOVEMBER, IS GENERATING A DEGREE OF POLITICAL INFIGHTING BY CONTENDERS FOR POWER WHICH HELPS FOSTER A GENERAL FEELING OF INSTABILITY AND MALAISE.

4. THUS, WHILE THERE ARE SOME DANGER SIGNALS, THE SITUATION HERE IS BY NO MEANS APPROACHING THE CRITICAL, AND IN FACT THE CITY OF DAMASCUS IS FAR MORE RELAXED THAN IT WAS A YEAR AGO WHEN INFIGHTING IN THE REGIONAL COMMAND LED THE PRESIDENT'S BROTHER, RIF'AT, TO PUT HIS PERSONAL FORCES ON FULL ALERT IN DAMASCUS FOR A PROTRACTED PERIOD. SEELYE

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